

COOP HOLDS FIRST IN-PERSON GENERAL MEETING IN THREE YEARS

November 7, 2023



By Rahima Nasa

Coop members gathered in late September for the first General Meeting since in-person meetings were put on hold at the beginning of the COVID pandemic. About 105 members showed up at Prospect Park Picnic House on the evening of September 27. Coop membership has decreased by about 9% since in-person meetings were put on hold. For many members it was their first in-person Coop meeting.

Mary Beth Bacha of the Chair Committee ran the meeting and explained how General Meetings worked. "The General Meeting is essentially the decision-making body of the Coop. Decisions are made democratically by a majority vote of members presen-

t,” Bacha explained while encouraging members to continue to attend the meetings, which enable the Coop to be more responsive to members’ views and wishes.

In the spirit of that ethos, the meeting opened with a forum for members to share questions. Member Carol Wald asked whether future GMs could be hybrid to better accommodate members unable to make it in person. Joe Holtz, the Coop’s General Manager, responded that it would be logistically difficult to have hybrid meetings because of technical challenges and issues with how deliberations would be conducted. He did not rule out the possibility that meetings could be hybrid in the future, however.

After two more members shared statements, the open forum closed and the meeting turned to the treasury report. Holtz, who also serves as Coop Treasurer, broke down the numbers of the report for members. A copy of the report had already been sent to members prior to the meeting so that they could follow along.

Back in October 2020, members voted to change the Coop’s markup from 21% to 25%; earlier this year, members voted to retain the higher markup. Coordinators noted that, in October, they will revisit the question of whether the markup will change for next fiscal year. “We can’t change it higher, but we could change it lower,” Holtz said. The general coordinators are expected to bring a comprehensive report about next year’s spending projections to the October General Meeting to inform decisions about changing the markup.

When the floor was opened for questions, a member wanted to know how the Coop has continued to improve despite a difficult financial climate. Holtz responded, the reason was the Coop’s decision to start letting new members join in December 2021. Holtz estimated that Coop membership shrank from approximately 17,000 members before the pandemic to about 11,750 after the Coop froze membership in March 2020. The decrease in membership led to a lower sales volume; gross margin dollars therefore decreased despite the higher markup. But when the Coop started allowing new members in again, sales volume improved. Membership is now at around 15,500 members. “When members shop, it’s one way of supporting the Coop and making

sure we're financially viable," Holtz said.

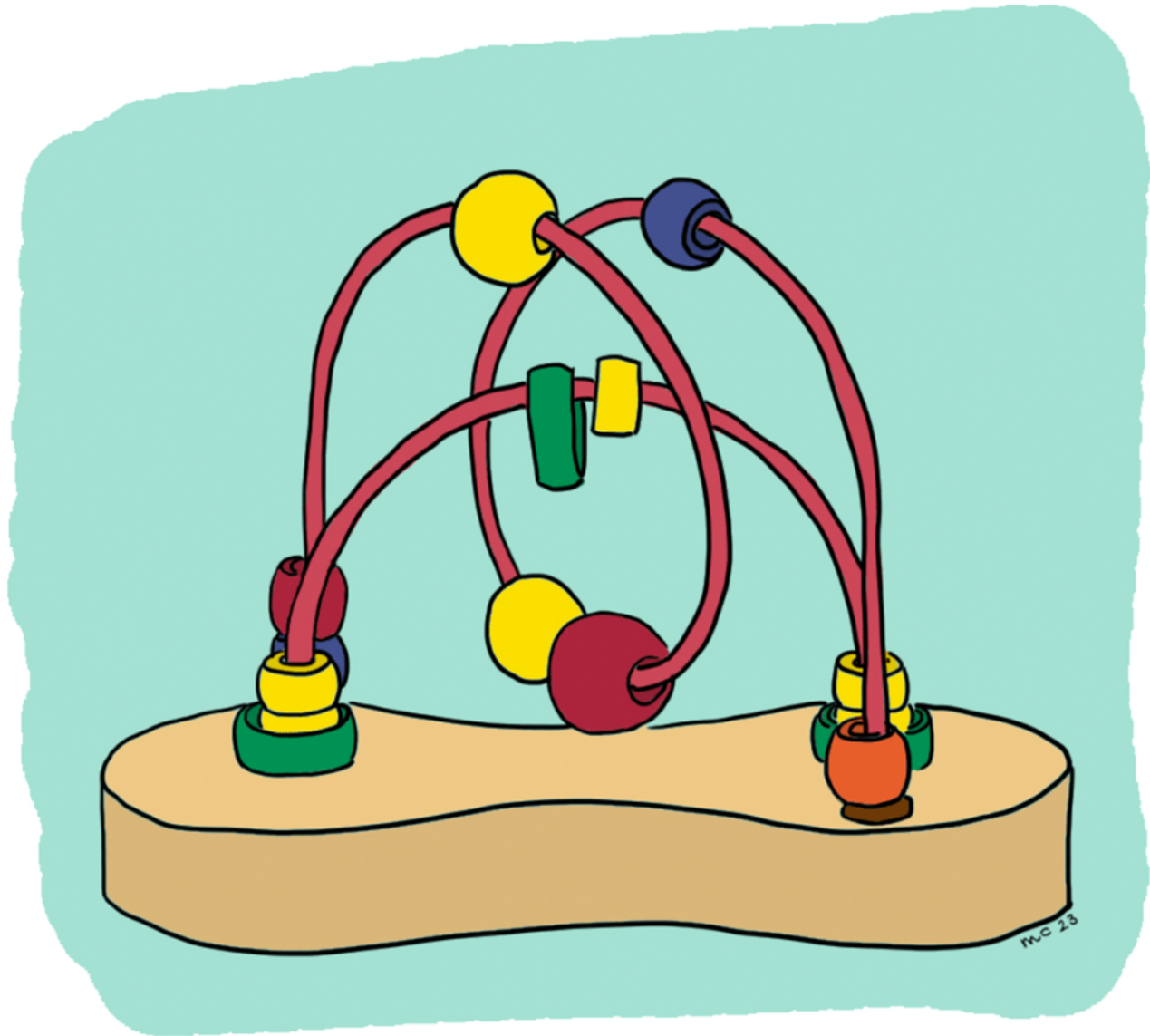


ILLUSTRATION BY MAGGIE CARSON

General Coordinator Ann Herpel delivered an update about the plans for offering child-care again. The primary obstacle is obtaining insurance for the childcare room, which requires a separate policy than for the rest of the Coop. Herpel could not share a timeline for when the childcare room would open without a bid from an insurer, which has proved to be challenging despite significant Coop efforts over five months. The

Coop's previous childcare insurer had dropped out of the childcare market after the Coop ended childcare during the height of the pandemic. Herpel explained that there are not a lot of players in the childcare insurance market. The Coop is not a licensed childcare provider and it would be impossible for the Coop to obtain a license for the room as New York State requires license holders to have two exits in the room, which the Coop's childcare room does not have.

However, the Coop has worked with an insurance broker to make other changes to the childcare system so that it is more appealing to insurance providers. This includes reducing the number of children in the room to eight, reducing the time they spend in childcare to two hours, and requiring background checks for everyone working in the room. "Our broker is working with nationwide networks and we just have had no success, and so after five full months of trying, we can't promise what will happen," Herpel said.

Regardless of what happens to childcare, bulk operations will head to the basement as planned. Moving the bulk operations downstairs will enable more efficient management of labor in the basement by allowing one staffer to manage both cheese process and bulk operations.

Next, General Coordinator Joe Szladek addressed why it has been so hard for members to find shifts. Essentially, the Coop reduces shifts by 9-10% during the summer, because sales fall 15% when many members are away. The decrease in sales means that labor needs are also lower but Szladek added that there is another reason at play. "We were really very short on member labor from January through the end of May of this year, with only about 89 percent of available shifts filling on average," said Szladek. "So it made operating the store really tough. We want to avoid that same situation from occurring."

Szladek encouraged members to sign up for recurring shifts or sign up for shifts 2-3 weeks in advance so that Coop staff can have confidence that there is enough member labor to keep the Coop functioning. Overall shifts were increased by 15% over the

previous year as of Labor Day weekend, and Coop staff expect that finding shifts will become easier in the coming months. The hope is to avoid labor shortages in the winter as shifts become more available.

Members then discussed different strategies for getting shifts, including working with the Cooperative Economics Alliance of New York City (CEANYC) to get work credit. Members interested in getting a work credit in this way should email CEANYC General Coordinator Ali Issa at organize@gocoopnyc.org.

Once committee updates wrapped up, the agenda moved to discussion items submitted by members. There were no agenda items to vote on, but one new agenda item was introduced: whether to establish required masking hours for shoppers and workers. The presentation was initially to be given by Sophia Tu, but as she was unable to make the meeting, member Kristina Bassi presented on her behalf.



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In October 2022, the Coop conducted a survey on whether members would be required to wear masks. The vote was close, with 51% of members voting to make masks optional while 43% of members responded that masks should be required for both shoppers and workers. Another survey was conducted in March 2023, where 68% of respondents voted to have masks optional while 32% voted that they remain mandatory for everyone inside the Coop.

There's been pushback on the decision, expressed in letters to the *Linewaiters' Gazette*. A petition had also gone out calling for two days of the week to be mandatory mask days to reflect the desires of 32% of members who wanted to keep the mask requirement for members who are disabled or immunocompromised. Bassi and Tu were not involved with the petition but Bassi explained that they agreed that having two mask days made sense. Bassi was open to which days that would be.

"We really want the Coop to live these values when we consider the lives and needs of our disabled and immune compromised member owners and we want to oppose policies that put medically vulnerable people in a place where they can't access participation to the Coop," said Bassi, referencing the Coop's mission statement.

Bassi was asked why everyone needed to mask if the vulnerable person already was wearing a mask, to which they replied that one-way masking is not enough to protect immunocompromised people. Other members had questions about the effectiveness of masking, how masking days and hours would be decided, and whether masking days were needed when COVID rates were low in the city.

Member Nancy Romer responded positively to the presentation: "It's a very minor accommodation and I think it's a sign of solidarity that we can have with people who have physical problems, are immunocompromised, and feel very beleaguered in general. We're probably going to have more pandemics, more viruses, more problems as climate change increases," Romer said.

When the vote for the proposal does come, one member urged, the Coop should ensure that the highest number of members, including high-risk immunocompromised members, are able to vote. They suggested that the next General Meeting either be held virtually or that masks be mandated during it. "This question isn't whether each of us individually wants to mask or not, it's about whether or not we are creating a space that is accessible for those who need it."

The agenda item will be brought to a vote at the next General Meeting in October.

Rahima Nasa has been a Coop member since 2022. She enjoys writing for the Gazette because of all the members she's gotten to meet and because it allows her to learn about how the Coop works. When she's not writing for the Gazette, Rahima likes to experiment with new ingredients and is on a never-ending quest to make the perfect pie crust.